

Hitbodedut: On Solitude in Jewish Mysticism

1. Introduction

Solitude is a common component in many mystical techniques. It was intended to attain a state of separation from the ordinary life by premeditatedly avoiding the regular relationship with people and with ordinary matters which may distract the mystic from the process of concentration on his way to experience a closer relation to the divine. As such, the tendency to solitude is found among most of the classical forms of mysticism in major forms of religion, more eminently in Christianity, in Islam and in Hindu asceticism. In the earliest forms of Judaism, the status of this mystical practice is, however, much more precarious. In the Bible, major figures are portrayed as attaining important revelations or performing crucial religious deeds in moments or periods of solitude, as it is the case of the perceptions of Moses, Elijah, or the High Priest in the Holy of the Holies.

However, in the Rabbinic type of this religion, the accent was conspicuously put on the formation of a society whose religious foci are not the rituals performed in solitude, or on extreme types of experiences attained in a state of seclusion, but upon a religiosity which has as its center the common worship, performed by the collective, which requires a certain quorum in order to be a perfect rite. This is the reason of the centripetal forces which shaped the religious ritual of Judaism in the formative period of the Mishnah and the Talmud. The literary corpus of the Talmudic-Midrashic version of Judaism reveals a deep concern with religious perfection to be attained by a shared ritual act, the emphasis being not only on the accomplishment of the individual but on the dialectical relationship between his perfection and that of the religious community. In such a religious modality, even the biblical paragons mentioned above, are scarcely able to inspire, even for the *perfecti*, a model for imitation. At least this is conspicuous in the case of the High Priest, a function that could not be filled by most of the Jews, who were not of priestly descentance, even less so in the absence of a Temple in the period of the Diaspora.

To a great extent, the indifference and reticence toward the practice of isolation is shared by the contemporary Jewish mysticism as it was formulated in the *Heikhalot* literature; There also the mystic is part of a group which is portrayed as functioning in the center, indeed a fictitious one, of Jewish ritual, the Temple in Jerusalem. Though it is difficult to learn from this attempt to identify the locus of the mystical activity with a Temple that was for long decades, if not for centuries, already destroyed and deserted, as to the *Sitz im Leben* of the mysti-

cism who produced the literature, the tendency to identify themselves with the central figures of Jewish legalism, who became the heroes of the Heikhalot literature, and with the center of Jewish ritual, apparently point to a collective-oriented type of mysticism. This tendency represents a certain shift in comparison to the earlier stages of Jewish religion; both in the biblical Judaism and in that which flourished in the intertestamental period, the individualistic religious achievements are not always conditioned by a religious community; though communities which were inclined to a more mystical form of life than most of the later types of Judaism were, indeed were in existence in this period – as the Therapeutes and the Qumran communities witness – the apocalyptic literature seems to focus more on the paranormal experience of the individual rather than on a collective religiosity.

If the foundation of a spiritual core of a religion is often a matter of an individual experience which become the shared experience of the community, Rabbinic Judaism emerged from a collective effort to systematize, articulate and fill gaps in the already established sacred scriptures. Not the mystical experiences of the individual masters who contributed to the interpretation of the law and its codification become the formative factors, but rather their public discussion and debates. The concept of corporate personality, so important in the biblical and rabbinic literatures,¹ leaves only little space for lonely individuals as forging their experience which could become paradigmatic, in splendid isolation. Moreover, the vision of the psychosomatic complex as very important, assumes also the importance of the body in its interactions with other men. However, as we shall see below, solitude is related more to dualistic anthropologies, where the soul plays a very important role. In other terms, the solitude should be seen as part of a disjunctive religiosity, based upon strong dichotomies, like that of the body versus soul, the saved versus the unsaved, the layman versus the hermit. On the other hand, more conjunctive forms of religion, as the earlier forms of Judaism are, would be reluctant to integrate practices that encourage retreat, separation or isolation.

However, in Jewish mysticism, moments or much longer periods of solitude become important steps in the religious life of founding figures like R. Hayyim Vital, R. Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov, known as the Besht, R. Elijah, the Gaon of Vilnius, or R. Nahman of Bratzlav. The question is how did such traditional figures, steeped in Rabbinic Judaism, betray such a positive attitude to solitude? What happened between the end of the Talmudic period and the 16th and 19th century religious leader mentioned above? In the following I shall offer some observations on the gradual absorption of the ideal of solitude in medieval Jewish literature, by pointing out to what seem to me to be the major sources of influence. With the exposure of some of the Jewish elite to other types of litera-

¹ See H. Wheeler Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel*, (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1980).

ture, more eminently the variety of philosophical literatures, in ancient and medieval periods, astrology, and Sufism, new spiritual models had been adopted, which changed substantially the more reticent attitude to personal perfection as achievable in solitude.² However, the newly accepted ideal has been only exceptionally practiced by long retreats from society, but has been more often integrated as a momentary seclusion for the purpose of achieving a mystical experience that was induced by means of an intense technique. In other words, only rarely has the solitude been practiced for a longer time, in the vein of a monastic life or a continued separation of the Jewish mystic from other human beings. In lieu we find in Jewish texts shorter periods of isolation necessary for achieving a stage of concentration as part of a broader mystical technique. I would say that in some cases, to be surveyed below, a state of solitude is to be understood not only as a temporary separation from men and corporeal matters in order to cleave to the spiritual entities, but also as a temporary exercise that should enable the mystic to attain a state of adherence to God while someone is among the multitude. I would say that the major development between the Biblical-Rabbinic religious modalities and those under scrutiny below is that local circumstances in the Jewish canonical scriptures become only later, – with the outstanding exception of Philo's influential writings – part of a technique to change the state of consciousness. If the former sorts of literature are concerned with the establishment of a more corporeal relation of intimacy between the worshiper and God which takes place in space, the latter literatures to be addressed below strive to create a spiritual affinity which is conditioned by shifting to a more concentrated mental activity. While the former literatures would emphasize the solitude as the result of an order or commandment, in the latter it is much more the decision of the mystic to enter a certain type of religious activity. Let me formulate the above discussions otherwise: the practice of solitude should be understood as the intersection of a state which is liminal for a conjunctive society, but as defining moment for a type of more individualistic spirituality that sees in the solitude the starting point for an inner journey. This observation is especially pertinent for the marginal status of Philo in Judaism, but also to the rather secondary role the writings of R. Abraham Maimuni or R. Yitzhaq of Acre, all thinkers who put explicitly an accent on solitude, in the

² Paul Fenton, "La 'Hitbodedut' chez les premiers Qabbalistes en Orient et chez les Soufis," *Priere, Mystique et Judaïsme*, ed. Roland Goetschel, (Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1987), pp. 133–157; M. Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, (SUNY Press, Albany, 1988), pp. 103–169; idem, "Hitbodedut as Concentration in Jewish Philosophy," in eds. M. Idel, Zeev W. Harvey, E. Schweid, *Shlomo Pines Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of His Eighteenth Birthday*, [Jerusalem, 1988], vol. I, pp. 39–60 [Hebrew]; Sara Klein-Braslavy, "Prophecy, Clairvoyance, and Dreams and the Concept of 'Hitbodedut' in Gersonides' Thought," *Daat*, vol. 39 (1997), pp. 23–68 (Hebrew). In these studies, a variety of significances of the concept of hitbodedut have been examined. I restricted my discussions here to the concept of physical solitude, though in many of the authors examined below also other meanings of this term are found.

general economy of Judaism. However, with the 16th century, it seems that the ideal of solitude becomes more acceptable and widespread, though it never enjoyed the importance it had in Christian monasticism or in Sufism.

2. The High Priest as Practicing Solitude

The nature of the High Priest's religious experience in the Holy of the Holies is a matter of conjecture. Though preoccupied with the ritualistic sacrifices, with prayer and with the pronunciation of the divine name as the main activities, there can be little doubt that the religious experience of this figure was conceived of as paramount. Indeed, the post-biblical descriptions of the priest as emerging from the Sanctum may betray a strong transformative experience. In the following, I would like to present some few examples of allegorical understandings of the unique status of the High Priest as completely alone when in the Holy of the Holies, as involved *inter alia* in a state of contemplation. The loneliness of this figure was thus conceived of by some Jewish authors as an isolation conducive to a mystical experience.

This is the case already in Philo of Alexandria's writings. He is, apparently, the first Jewish author who expressed a quite positive attitude to solitude as possible connected to contemplation. Probably, he is also the most influential one, though apparently not on Jewish authors.³ In his *Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres*, 127 he wrote:

For Divine Wisdom is a lover of solitudes, since loneliness is dear to her because of the solitary of God who is her owner, and thus in parable she is called the turtle-dove.⁴

The turtle-dove is a symbol for the divine reason, *theia sophia*, who is similar to the solitary divinity. Thus, the inclination to solitariness and solitude assumes a certain imitation of God, both by the divine reason and by those loved by it, because they practice solitude. It may be implied that also the solitary recluse would be conceived as assimilating himself to God. Therefore, Philo offered a metaphysical explanation for the solitude: the solitary God who loves the solitary divine reason which, at its turn, loves the human recluses, I assume the solitudes of the humans, who are inclined to a spiritual life of contemplation.

³ See, especially, Antoine Guillaumont, "Philon et les Origines du Monachisme," in *Philon d'Alexandrie, Lyon 11-15 Septembre 1966*, (Editions CNRS, Paris 1967), pp. 366, 370; Joshua Finkel, "The Guises and Vicissitudes of a Universal Folk-Belief in Jewish and Greek Tradition," *Harry Austryn Wolfson Jubilee Volume English Section*, [Jerusalem, 1965], vol. I, pp. 236-240, 242-243 where the possible relationship between Midrashic material and Philo on the ecstatic experience of the High Priest was dealt with, without addressing the issue of solitude.

⁴ *Philo of Alexandria*, tr. F. H. Colson, G. H. Whitaker, (London, Cambridge, 1949), vol. IV, p. 347.

Indeed, Philo was fond of a certain group of solitary persons: In his important description of the Therapeutai he mentions that

They are neither contiguous as in towns, since close proximity is troublesome and displeasing to those assiduously striving for solitude, nor yet far apart ... In each house there is a sacred chamber which is called a sanctuary or closet, in which in isolation they are initiated into the mysteries of the holy life. They take nothing into it, neither drink nor food, nor anything else necessary for bodily needs, but laws and oracles delivered through the prophets, and psalms and other books through which knowledge and piety are increased and perfected.⁵ They always remember God and never forget him.⁶

What seems to me extremely interesting for the later developments of Jewish mystical practices, and of Western mysticism in general, is the description of chambers dedicated to the pursuit of solitude. This theme recurs time and again in the medieval and early modern Jewish discussion, apparently under the direct influence of Muslim mysticism. Special attention deserves the last sentence, were the constant memory of God is mentioned as the purpose of the solitude. As we shall see below in some few texts numerous others are available and cannot be dealt with here repetitions of the divine names, described as pronunciation, *bazkharab*, which is related also to remembering the divine names, is permeating some forms of Jewish spirituality from medieval texts until modern Hasidism.

However, in addition to the in-door solitude, Philo describes also the Therapeutes' walking outside the city; earlier in this book Philo writes about these religious *perfecti*:

they pass their days outside the walls pursuing solitude in gardens⁷ or lonely bits of country ... because they know how unprofitable and mischievous are associations with persons of dissimilar character.⁸

Solitude here is described as profilactic rather than as a way for imitatio dei as in one of the earlier quotes. It creates the condition for the beginning of contemplation rather than being already part of the very path of turning toward the

⁵ On the presence of books in the room dedicated to solitude see below the text of R. Yitzhaq of Acre.

⁶ *De Vita Contemplativa*, 24–26, *Philo of Alexandria*, translation and introduction David Winston, (Paulist Press, New York, 1981), p. 46. On the possible impact of groups of contemplatives, like those of the Therapeutes, on Plotinus see Emile Brehier, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, tr. Joseph Thomas, (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1958), pp. 2–3. Brehier expressed often in his writings the possible impact of issues, like those expressed by Philo, and Plotinus. See also Winston, *ibidem*, p. 317 note 15.

⁷ On gardens as places for solitude see below the passage quoted from Yohanan Alemanno. Though I am not sure that the Renaissance author was influenced by Philo's writings, such a possibility should not be excluded.

⁸ *De Vita Contemplativa*, 20, *ibidem*, p. 125.

One. Let me turn now to one of Philo's treatment of the High Priest,⁹ which deals with his experience in the Holy of the Holies:

The God-loving soul, having stripped itself of the body and the objects dear to the body, and having fled far away from these, acquires fixity, firmness and stability in the perfect precepts of virtue. It is therefore attested to by God that it loves what is noble; 'for,' says he 'it was called the tent of witness.' He passes over in silence who it is that calls it so, in order that the soul may be roused and consider who it is that bears testimony to virtue-loving minds. For this reason the high priest shall not enter the Holy of Holies in his robe¹⁰ but having doffed the vesture of opinions and impressions of the soul, and having left it behind for those who love externals and esteem semblance above reality, shall enter naked without color and sounds, to pour as a libation the soul-blood and offer as incense the whole mind to God our savior and benefactor.¹¹

The High Priest's solitariness in the Holy of the Holies is understood to teach the fleet from the multitude and corporeality, rather than a requirement for the performance of the ritual. His sacrifices are allegorized as pointing to acts of spiritual devotion. To a certain extent, the Therapeutes' chamber of solitude, described as a sanctuary, is to be understood as reflecting as playing the same role as played by the tent of witness and the Holy of Holies. In any case, it is important to draw attention to the phenomenological, and perhaps also historical, affinities between the above passage and the last section of Plotinus's *Enneads*, where an interesting view of the sanctuary as the place for mystical contemplation is offered.¹² Perhaps pertinent for the above discussion of the High Priest as a mystic is the possibility that Philo himself was of priestly ori-

⁹ On Philo's various views of the High Priest see Jean Laporte, "The High Priest in Philo of Alexandria," in *Heir of the Septuagint, Philo, Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity, Festschrift for Earle Hilgert*, eds. D. T. Runia, D. M. Hay, D. Winston, (Scholars Press, Atlanta, Georgia, 1991), pp. 71–82.

¹⁰ Lev. 16:1.

¹¹ *Legum Allegoriae*, 2.55–56. Cf. *Philo of Alexandria*, Winston, p. 254. See also *De ebrietate*, 85.

¹² See *Enneads* 6:9:11. On the possible impact of Philo on Plotinus see E. R. Dodds, "Numenius and Ammonius," *Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique – Les sources de Plotin V* (Vandoeuvres-Geneve, 1960), pp. 17–38; idem, *Pagan Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, (Norton @ Company, New York, London, 1970), pp. 93–96. On Numenius and Plotinus see Edouard des Places, *Numenius-Fragments*, (Paris, 1973), pp. 23–26. On Numenius and the Jews, see Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, (Jerusalem, 1980), vol. II, pp. 206–216. On Philo and Numenius see idem, p. 207 n. 5. For another affinity between Philo and Plotin, apparently via Numenius, see Winston, *Philo of Alexandria*, p. 315 n. 103. Winston implicitly accepted a certain relationship between Philo and Plotin; see his paper, "Was Philo a Mystic?" in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, J. Dan and F. Talmage, eds. (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), pp. 29, 32.

¹³ See Daniel P. Schwartz, "Philo's Priestly Descent," eds., F. E. Greenspahn, E. Hilgert, B. L. Mack, *Nourished with Peace, Studies in Hellenistic Judaism in Memory of Samuel Sandmel*, [Chico, 1984], pp. 155–171.

gin.¹³

Philo represents a synthesis between biblical Judaism and Middle Platonism. I assume that some of the contemplative aspects of the above passage stem from the Greek contemplative traditions. They provided terms and concepts for the allegorical understanding of the High Priest. It is possible that some forms of allegorical understanding of the Greek mystery religions could influence Philo's treatment of the experience in the Holy of the Holies. Nevertheless, the description of the Therapeutes may point to a propensity to solitude and mystical interpretations of the ritual might have been the patrimony of more than one person, Philo.

A similar intellectual dynamic recurred many centuries later. In one of the writings of R. Abraham ben Shmuel Abulafia (1240–c. 1291) we read:

whoever wants to come into the Temple and enter to its inmost part, has to sanctify himself by the sanctify of the High Priest and to study and teach and keep and do, until he will be perfect in his ethical and intellectual attributes, and then he should seclude himself¹⁴ in order to receive the prophetic influx from the mouth of the Dynamis.¹⁵

Abulafia himself was not a priest, neither was he especially interested in rebuilding of a material Temple, despite his belief that he is the Messiah. He is resorting to the templar themes understood as allegories, in a manner reminiscent of Philo's and Plotin's stands, though I have no reason to assume a direct influence of any of them on Abulafia. In his case the impact of Neoaristotelianism is the main source for the allegorical interpretation.

R. Abraham ben Hananel of Eskira, a late 13th and early 14th centuries Kabbalist active in Soria, wrote in his voluminous treatise *Yesod 'Olam* that

When the [high] priest entered the Holy of Holies, which is the solitude,¹⁶ his garment produced sounds from the thirty-two bells, as it is written, 'and his sound shall be heard when he goeth in unto the holy place ... that he die not'¹⁷.¹⁸

¹⁴ yitboded. This term can be translated here also as concentrate.

¹⁵ *Matzref la-Kesef*, Ms. Sassoon 56, fols. 33 b–34 a. I would like to point out that I decided not to deal here with the many cases when the term hitbodedut is mentioned in the context of the High Priest's concentration on the letters of the 'Urim and Tummim. This issue requires a separate study. See, inter alia, Klein-Braslavy, "Prophecy, Clairvoyance," pp. 51–53.

¹⁶ hitbodedut. For identifications of concept hitbodedut with the concept of the Temple in Jewish philosophy contemporary to this Kabbalist see R. Yedayah ha-Bedreshi's commentary on the Talmudic legends, printed as *Be'urim 'al Ma'amarei Hazal be-Midrash Tehillim*, ed. S. Buber, (Cracaw, 1891), p. 35; R. Joseph ibn Kaspi, *Sefer Menorat ha-Kesef*, in ed. Y. Y. Last, *'Asarah Keli Kesef*, (Pressburg, 1903), vol. II pp. 100–101, where the Holy of the Holies is described as 'the place of hitbodedut.' See also *ibidem*, p. 105, 125.

¹⁷ Ex. 28:35.

¹⁸ Ms. Moscow-Guenzburg 607, fol. 8 a.

The mystical perception of the High Priest as entering states of ecstasy because of music is worthwhile of a much more detailed investigation than we can do here.¹⁹ It is indubitably connected to much earlier views of the High Priest as undergoing mystical experiences, as we learn already from Philo's description of the High Priest and parallels found in the Midrash.

The musical performance was part of a mystical technique well represented in ecstatic Kabbalah. However, this brand of Jewish mysticism, inclined as it was to Aristotelian interpretations of mystical experiences, is not the only Kabbalistic school that embraced this view. Let me introduce some other examples, when Kabbalistic views were combined with Neoplatonic ones, that do not depend upon ecstatic Kabbalah, and nevertheless represent music as part of a mystical path. R. Abraham ben Hananel of Eskira writes that

When the soul craves for solitude and to regale itself in the luxuries of the intellect, were it not that Nature stands in its way with a temptation of images, it would separate itself from the body. For this reason, the *kinnor* was struck in front of the altar at the time that the sacrifice was offered²⁰ . . .²¹ It is known to those who speak of the science of music that music is intermediate between the spiritual and the material, in that it draws forth the intellect at the time of its imprisonment, as it is written, 'but now bring me a minstrel'²², and as it is written, 'awake *nevel* and *kinnor*'²³. As Nature drags the intellect, so to speak, to leave the intellectual [world] and to amuse itself with material things.²⁴

The more particular example of the High Priest is therefore formulated within the context of a more general concept of the search of the soul for solitude, a pursuit that can be assisted by resorting to music, whose purpose is to appease the lower human souls or the corporeal impulses, and so liberate the higher human capacity to contemplate. To a certain extent, we may perceive here an influence of Plotinian description of the tension between the natural and the spiritual realm. The view of the High Priest as the prototype of the mystic who must start with practicing solitude is found also in Hasidism. The Great Maggid of Mezherits was quoted to have said that

¹⁹ See M. Idel, "Conceptualizations of Music in Jewish Mysticism," in ed. Lawrence Sullivan, *Enchanting Powers, Music in the World's Religions*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1997), pp. 159–188.

²⁰ The phrase, 'the harp was struck in front of the altar' seems to be based on the Mishnaic phrase 'the flute was played in front of the altar,' in 'Arakhin 2:3.

²¹ For the passage skipped here see above the quote on the High Priest.

²² II Kings 3:15

²³ Ps. 57:9

²⁴ Ms. Moscow-Guenzburg 607, fol. 8 a. This passage seems to be an adaptation from *Muserei ha-Philosofim*, I, 18 (8); cf. Israel Adler, *Hebrew Writings Concerning Music*, [G. Henle Verlag, München, 1975], p. 148; see also the emendations of the sequence of this passage in E. Werner and Y. Sonne, *HUCA* vol. 17 (1942–43), pp. 515–516 and p. 525 (English translation). For the connection between music and sacrifices, see Shem Tov ibn Falaquera's *Sefer ha-Mevaqqesh* (based on the music epistle of the *Ihwan al-Safa*); cf. Adler, *Hebrew Writings Concerning Music*, p. 165, sentence 3.

'and the priest' – that is, the one engaged in worship – 'shall wear his linen garment'²⁵. For it states in *Hovot ha-Levavot*, that man must accustom himself to the practice of solitude, to be separated from other people, until he accustoms himself so that, even if he is among a thousand people, he will also be attached to Him, blessed be He, and there will be nothing separating or interrupting him from his attachment to Him, blessed be He. And as I explained the verse, 'And no person shall be in the Tent of the Meeting when he enters to atone for himself and for his household'²⁶. For it is known that prior to prayer a person must cast off his corporeality and attach his thought to the exaltation of God, as if he is not standing among people, he is able to pray with great *kavvanah*²⁷ and without self-interest. Of this it is said 'And no man shall be in the Tent of Meeting' – that is, the Synagoge or the House of Study,²⁸ in the place where people gather to pray. Then, 'there shall be no man' in your thoughts – that is, you shall cast off your corporeality so much so that you shall forget that you are standing among people.²⁹

This allegorization of the High Priest and his service is very instructive. It assumes that already beforehand his service had been interpreted as an act of isolation, and this act of corporeal isolation has been allegorized here as pointing not to a seclusion between the mystic and other men, but an act of strong concentration, or an inner spiritual isolation which allows an uninterrupted adherence to God, even amidst the crowd. This ideal of being alone even among people, which is recurrent in Hasidism, has been conceived by Joseph Weiss as the innovation of the Besht,³⁰ draws, in fact from much earlier Jewish sources, such as R. Bahya ibn Paquda's *Sefer Hovot ha-Levavot*, who drew, at his turn, from the Sufi concept of *kbahwat dar anjuman*.³¹ In any case, the Great Maggid is explicitly referring to his sources in R. Bahya ibn Paquda.³² Paradoxically enough, the most elitist experience in Judaism, that of the High Priest entering alone in the Holy of the Holies, had been interpreted as pointing only to the initial step for a much longer process of learning how to master oneself even when among the crowd. Though there is no critique involved here, the shift from seclusion to a practice that takes place in public – prayer and study alto-

²⁵ Lev. 6:2–3.

²⁶ Lev. 16:17.

²⁷ On the meaning of *Kavvanah* in Hasidic prayer see Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, (SUNY Press, Albany, 1995), pp. 149–188.

²⁸ See the texts of R. Elijah de Vidas and R. Shabbatai of Rashkov to be adduced below.

²⁹ R. Benjamin of Salositz, *Sefer Torei Zahav*, (Mohilev, 1816), fols. 38d–39a; See also Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism, Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth Century Hasidic Thought*, (Magnes Press, Jerusalem, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993), tr. J. Chipman, p. 253 and note 28.

³⁰ See his *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism*, ed. David Goldstein, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985), pp. 132–133.

³¹ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, (The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1978), pp. 243, 364.

³² Apparently *Sefer Hovot ha-Levavot*, ed. Tzifroni, (Mossad ha-Rav Kook, Jerusalem, ND), IX:3, p. 532; IX:5 p. 536.

gether – is reminiscent of the passage we shall adduce below from R. Barukh of Medzibuz. We may describe the emergence of the mystical-allegorical understandings of the High Priest as practicing solitude in the Holy of Holies as a deep change in the nature of Jewish religiosities. While in the Biblical-Talmudic literature the High priest is the most faithful representative of the corporate personality of the Jewish people, in the allegorical understandings of this figure he becomes much more a person striving for an experience of personal perfection. The emphasis on solitude is quite emblematic of the separation of the religious leader, in lieu of his been envisioned as an emissary.

3. Solitude as a More General Ideal

The projection of the vision of solitude on the High Priest in the Holy of Holies represents the ascent of an ideal adapted from the variety of non-Jewish sources mentioned above and adopted to the ideal figures in the past. The case of the High Priest is however not the single pertinent example. More become the ideal of solitude spread in Jewish text, more did it become an hermeneutical tool, as we had seen in the previous paragraph. So, for example, we learn from a book composed in Safed in 1325 by R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon that a mystic:

he shall know the taste of contemplation in the mountains, in a place where there are no other people, like Elisha the prophet³³ and his friends, who killed themselves during their lifetimes.³⁴

This text points to the attainment of a spiritual redemption, referred here by the killing themselves, an act which should be understood against the background of the view that whoever wants to live in the world to come, should die for this world.³⁵ Therefore the isolation from other men is only part of a more drastic attitude to reality which demands a separation from this world. In fact, according to another Kabbalist, a contemporary of R. Shem Tov and an author who will preoccupy us much more in the following pages, R. Yitzhaq of Acre, seclusion will increase with time and become more widespread when the end of time will come closer:

the persons who isolate themselves will multiply and the [number of] the ascetics will increase and before the completion of the sixth millennium men and ani-

³³ See II Kings 4:9:10 and the discussion above in connection of the view of R. Yitzhaq of Acre.

³⁴ *Sefer Baddei 'Aron*, Ms. Paris, Biblioteque Nationale 840, fol. 45 b. On seclusion in mountains see also below the quote from R. Menahem de Lonzano, and the practice of the Besht in the 18th century.

³⁵ On this issue see Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, tr. J. Chipman, (SUNY Press, Albany, 1987), pp. 142–143, 177 note 347, Michael Fishbane, *The Kiss of God, Spiritual and Mystical Death in Judaism*, (Washington University Press, Seattle & London, 1994), pp. 39–47.

mals will disappear from the world because the soul gathered strength over the body and the deletion of all the senses of the body and man will be even while alive a soul without a body out of his great adherence to God, blessed be He, while it is still imprisoned in its prison.³⁶

Seclusion is therefore part of a broader process of spiritualization of religious life, which consists in the gradual separation between body and soul, or the mastering of the latter by the former. This is a reading of history as the arena of the growing role of the recluse as a paradigmatic figure. I suggest to see in the 16th century Safedian Kabbalists, some few of their texts to be quoted below, the inheritors of the traditions and the practices of the ecstatic Kabbalists dealing with *hitbodedut* as mental concentration and seclusion and, at the same time; a crucial stage in the history of the history of mystical techniques in Kabbalah who served as transmitter of the earlier techniques to both Sabbateanism and Hasidism.

Within such a framework main figures like the alleged author of the book of the *Zohar*, R. Shimeon bar Yohai had been construed as a recluse. Capitalizing upon the historical fact that bar Yohai spend several years in a cave in order to escape the Roman persecutions, R. Menahem de Lonzano, a 16th century Safedian Kabbalist wrote:

All his days he was adhering to the Holy One, blessed be He, and was separated from men as known, [suffering the] torment of the case ... and all his days he was a recluse in the mountains and hills and deserts and fields.³⁷

Let me introduce now an important passager authored by an even more famous Safedian figure, R. Hayyim Vital, who valorized those ancient Jewish figures who were described as practicing solitude. In his introduction to the influential ethical-mystical treatise *Sha'arei Qedushah*, he offers a very interesting survey of the decline of Jewish mysticism. The first and best representatives of this form of mysticism were the biblical prophets, who were portrayed as mystics who attained the ideal of being united with God. Then he depicts another, later group, which attempted to imitate the former in achieving the experience of union:

The ancient Hasidim come after them, and were called *Perushim*, and they sought to follow the path of the prophets and their practice³⁸ and imitate them in caves of cliff and in deserts and they separated themselves from the ways of men. And some of them were separated in their houses as if they were walking in

³⁶ *Me'irat 'Einayyim*, ed. Amos Goldreich, (Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1984), pp. 239–240 (Hebrew). More on this passage see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 145–146 note 34, where another translation was offered.

³⁷ *'Omer ha-Man*, (Vilnius, 1883), fol. 1b. See also above, note 34. See also R. Moshe Cordovero's *Sefer 'Or Yaqar*, vol. 5 p. 45 and see Bracha Sack; *The Kabbalah of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero*, (Ben Gurion University Press, Beer Sheva, 1995), 43 and note 55, p. 228 (Hebrew).

³⁸ The Hebrew text, *u-ve-ma'agaloteihem*, is very poetic and hard to translate in a precise manner.

a desert,³⁹ and day and night they were not silent, praising God by their study of the Torah and the psalms of King David, blessed be his memory, which are enjoying the heart, until their thought was cleaving forcefully and with a strong desire to the supernal lights. And they steadily continued this [practice] all their life until they reached the Divine spirit, and prophesied.⁴⁰

This was not only an issue of historical understanding of the nature of the path which leads to union, but also a recommendation for the present, as we learn from his discussions later in the book.⁴¹ Thus, projection in the past is, at least to a certain degree, part of an attempt to reinvigorate a present, conceived of as being oblivious of the ancient mystical techniques. To a great extent, in this book Vital gave expression of views found in ecstatic Kabbalah, both as formulated by R. Abraham Abulafia and R. Yitzhaq of Acre, some of the latter's stands on seclusion had been quoted explicitly in the last part of *Sha'arei Qedushah*.⁴² I wonder to what extent Vital is accepting also the view of R. Yitzhaq of Acre adduced above, dealing with the increase of the phenomenon of seclusion with the coming closer the time of redemption. In any case in the above passage he deals with the decrease of such a phenomenon after it had been well established in the past.

4. Solitude in Sufism: The Place of Solitude

With the ascent of the ascetic life in Christianity, and Islam and the emergence of full fledged forms of mysticism in those religions, some Jews were exposed to these novel types of spiritual ideals. Though cultivated in religious environments often hostile to Judaism, these ideals were nevertheless conceived by some Jews as religiously valuable, and even worthwhile of imitation. The reasons offered for this sporadic emulation of the ascetic values in the competitive religions by Jewish authors was an argument which is noteworthy; the ascetic practices of the Christian and Muslims were conceived of not as the latter's innovation but an adoption of older Jewish values, which were in those old times, part of the Jewish spiritual patrimony, but were lost among the Jews while they were preserved by the other religions. On the ground of this assumption, it was easier to adopt the apparently alien practices, with the pertinent changes, and expose them as a more spiritual version of Judaism. If this argument is always a matter of apologetic is a disputable issue. There seems to be some truth in the conception of the ancient forms of Judaism as including some elements which were ignored, neglected or rejected by the later strata of Jewish religion. Philo's

³⁹ Compare R. Bahya ibn Paquda, *Hovot ha-Levavot*, IX:3, p. 531.

⁴⁰ (Benei Beraq, 1973), p. 7 (Hebrew).

⁴¹ *ibidem*, pp. 112, 114–115.

⁴² See *Ketavim Hadashim le-Rabbinu Hayyim Vital ZaL*, (Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 28–30, and 4 respectively.

succinct discussions and the plausible existence of the Therapeutai, may serve as indications as to the possibility that the medieval masters had some historical information as to the existence or earlier Jewish recluses.

This claim as to the Jewish extraction of the ascetic ideal is prominent in two cases: in that of R. Bahya ibn Paquda, an eleventh century philosopher with a obvious inclination to mysticism, who distinguished between three types of *hitbodedut*,⁴³ and in early 13th century in the writings produced in the circle of R. Abraham Maimuni (1186–1237), the son of Moses Maimonides. Both authors wrote in Arabic and absorbed a substantial quantity of Sufic concepts and practices, one of them being the importance and practice of solitude.⁴⁴

It is in place to discuss here in relation to *hitbodedut* as solitude a description of the Sufi practice of *dhikr*, which was likely to have been known to Jewish authors from the mid-13th century on: I refer to a passage in R. Abraham Ibn Hasdai's Hebrew translation of a work by the Persian Muslim theologian, jurist and mystic, Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1058–1111), known in Jewish literature under the name *Moznei Tzedeq*. The Sufi path has been portrayed in this highly influential treatise, extant in many tens of Hebrew manuscripts, as follows:

I decided to follow this path, and I took counsel with an old teacher of the Sufi worship as to how I ought to behave regarding continual reading of the books of religion. And he answered me thus: 'Know that the path towards this matter is to cut off and cease completely all of those things by which one is attached to this world, until your heart will not think at all of wife, or children, or money or home or wisdom or rulership. But bring yourself to a place such that their presence or absence becomes a matter of indifference. Then seclude yourself in a corner and make do with the divine service of the commandments as ordered, and sit with a heart empty of all thoughts and worry, and let all your thoughts be only of the supreme God. And accustom your tongue to say the name of the living God, let it not cease to call upon the Lord continually, as in the saying of the prophet, 'let them not depart from your mouth'⁴⁵. And all this in order to understand God and to apprehend Him, until you reach the stage that, were you to allow your tongue to move by itself, it would run quickly to say this, because of its habit to do this thing. And afterwards accustom yourself to another thing, that is, to meditate in your heart and soul, in your thoughts alone, without any movement of your tongue. And then become accustomed to another thing, that there remain in your heart only the meaning of the words, not the letters of the words or the form of speech, but only the subject itself, abstract, firmly fixed in your heart, as something obligatory and constant. The choice is in your hand only up to this limit. After that there is no choice; you can but constantly remove the

⁴³ See the bibliography mentioned in Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 142 note 7 and for the impact of this author on Safedian Kabbalah R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo, Lawyer and Mystic*, (JPS, Philadelphia, 1977), pp. 57–58. See above, note 31.

⁴⁴ Fenton, "La 'Hitbodedut'," pp. 151–157.

⁴⁵ Isa. 59:1.

sickness of destructive lusts – but after that your own [free] will ceases, and yours is only to hope for that which may appear, of the opening of the gates of mercy, what is seen of Him to those who cleave to the exalted Name, which is a small part of what was seen by the prophets ... but the level of those who cling to God can not be told, nor their exalted qualities, and their imagination, and their [moral] virtues. These are the ways of the Sufis.⁴⁶

The corner mentioned above translates, literally, the Sufi technical term *zawiya* which is similar to the term *zawwiyyt*, which stands in Hebrew for corner but also for the place of seclusion.⁴⁷ The final goal of the Sufi path, as described in the Hebrew version, is to adhere to God. The essence of this adherence is discussed immediately prior to the passage quoted above

And to always hope and wait for God to open for him the gates of mercy, as these things were revealed to those who cling to Him and to the prophets, and their souls acquired that perfection of which man is capable – not through learning, but by separation from this world and *hitbodedut* and casting off all desires, and making his goal to receive God with all his heart and all his soul. And whoever shall be with God, God will be with him.⁴⁸

According to the Hebrew version of Al-Ghazali, the Sufis had a fixed path conductive to a communion with God, which involved several clearly delimited stages: 1) separation from the world; 2) indifference or equanimity; 3) solitude – *hitbodedut*; 4) repetition of God's name; 5) communion with or reception of God.

One of the Kabbalists who repeatedly resorted to the term *hitbodedut* and *mitbodedim* on the one hand, and *Perushim* understood as ascetics on the other is R. Yitzhaq of Acre. Educated in Acre, in a geographical environment where Sufis, especially disciples of ibn 'Arabi, were active,⁴⁹ he not only describes hermits and contemplators, but also recommended seclusion and solitude as ideal modes of spirituality. In his *'Otzar Hayyim*, an important treatise where he relates, *inter alia*, his own mystical experiences, he wrote:

We should do good things and be preoccupied with the prerequisites of the *hitbodedut*, to sit in the small chamber where there are books⁵⁰ myrtles,⁵¹ ink and a pen and paper and a table in order to deal with the combination of letters to

⁴⁶ ed. Jacob Goldenthal, (Leipzig, Paris, 1839), pp. 49–51. The original Arabic has been printed in Al-Ghazali, *Yihya 'Ulum el-Din*, (Cairo, 1933), III, pp. 16–17; Fenton, "La 'Hitbodedut'," pp. 143–144.

⁴⁷ See J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1971), pp. 18, 176–179.

⁴⁸ *Moznei Tzedeq*, pp. 48–49.

⁴⁹ On this topic see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 73–102.

⁵⁰ Compare above the text from Philo.

⁵¹ *Hadasim*. For the occurrence of aromatics in other ecstatic texts in a similar context see the anonymous *Sba'arei Tzedeq* composed late in the 13th century, and R. Yehudah Albotini's early 16th century *Sefer Sullam ha-'Aliyyah*, ed. J. E. Porush, (Jerusalem, 1989), pp. 26, 73 respectively.

draw within us the divine intellect⁵² so that we shall gain [to know] the Account of Creation ... and the Account of the Chariot ... 'the bed and a table, and a stool, and a candlestick'^{53, 54}

The small chamber or the attic, *'aliyyat qir*, is therefore the place which is connected to the practice of *hitbodedut*, which is including the technique of combination of letters as conductive to an experience of union with God, achieved by bringing the divine intellect within the mystic. The attic and the other household appliances are reminiscent of Elisha's stay in the house of the Shunamite woman. His practice has been understood by R. Yitzhaq as a preparation for solitude. Another text, parallel to this one occurs elsewhere in the same book, where this Kabbalist recommends:

... live a life of suffering in your house of solitude⁵⁵ lest your appetitive soul overpower your intellective soul, for by this you will merit to bring into your intellective soul the influx of the Divinity, and in the Torah, that is to say, in the wisdom of combination and its prerequisites.⁵⁶

This passage betrays one of the first occurrences of the Hebrew phrase pointing, as a technical term, to a 'house of solitude' in Jewish literature, a counterpart of the phrase *bayt al-khalwa* in Sufism. Not that the very practice was new among the Jews. It was already described in Abraham Abulafia's writings and in one of his disciples⁵⁷. However, it seems that only since the very end of the 13th century, does this term began to play a role in Jewish mysticism. So, for example, a contemporary of R. Yitzhaq, R. Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, mentions in his widespread *Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah*, 'the houses of the recluses who dedicates themselves to the worship of God', *batei ha-mitbodedim le-'avodat ha-Shem*.⁵⁸

⁵² *ba-sekbel ha-'Elohi*. Bringing down divine powers by means of combinations of letters is found, though rarely, in Abraham Abulafia, and in Hasidism. See, e.g., R. Qalonimus Qalman Epstein ha-Levi of Cracaw, *Sefer Ma'or va-Shemesh*, (Jerusalem, 1992), pp. 264–265, 267 (Hebrew).

⁵³ II Kings 4:10. See also below the quote from R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon.

⁵⁴ Ms. Moscow-Guensburg 775, fol. 1 a. See Efrayim Gottlieb, *Studies in Kabbalah Literature*, ed. J. Hacker, (Tel Aviv, 1987), p. 243 (Hebrew); Fenton, "La 'Hitbodedut,'" p. 145.

⁵⁵ *Beit ha-hitbodedutkha*. The phrase *beit ha-hitbodedut* occurs again in another manuscript passage of this Kabbalist, which has been printed and discussed in Moshe Idel, "On the History of the Interdiction to Study Kabbalah before the Age of Forty," *Association of Jewish Studies Review*, vol. V (1980), pp. 8–9 (Hebrew), and note 61 below.

⁵⁶ Ms. Moscow-Guensburg 775, fol. 170 b. More on this passage see Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, pp. 98–99.

⁵⁷ See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 37–39.

⁵⁸ (Jerusalem, 1961), fol. 52 c. The passage including this phrase has been quoted in the highly influential book *Sefer ha-Peliyah*, (Koretz, 1784), I, fol. 57 b; by R. Yohanan Alemanno in the untitled treatise found in Ms. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale 849, fol. 74 a; and by widespread book of R. Elijah of Smyrna, *Midrash Talpuyyot*, (Jerusalem, 1963), fol. 163 b.

According to R. Yitzhaq of Acre, the 'house of solitude', where someone dedicates himself to contemplation, is part of a broader mystical path which includes also other practices, like bringing the divine influx or intellect within the soul and the combination of letters, conceived of in one of the texts as 'Torah.' Thus, this Kabbalist, like R. Bahya ibn Paquda and Abulafia beforehand, and some of the Kabbalists who followed Abulafia's Kabbalah, conceived solitude to be part of a more systematic approach to a mystical path which culminated with the union of the spiritual part of man with a divine power or with God Himself. Though we should not expect to find in Kabbalah, just as in any other form of mysticism, a constant type of relations between all the components of the technical path, the recurrence of seclusion, mental concentration, combinations of letters and union with God in many texts allow the assumption of a mystical path that starts with isolation, inspired by Sufi material.

In this context I cannot survey all the main steps of the history of the mystical paths as formulated in ecstatic Kabbalah⁵⁹ but I would like to point out that the rather prolonged seclusion of the Besht in the Carpatian mountains, and even more pertinent is the occurrence of the expression *beit ha-bitbodedut* as built by the Besht.⁶⁰ Moreover, in a manner similar to R. Yitzhaq of Acre in the passages adduced above, many Hasidic masters described the mystic as drawing within himself the divinity. The concept of bringing down the deity, or the divine presence or other similar entity is recurrent in R. Yitzhaq's discussions on the *bitbodedut*,⁶¹ and may be related also the Al-Ghazali's reception of God, in the passage quoted above. Thus, the ecstatic Kabbalist proposed a mystical path that includes a place for seclusion, combination of letters and bringing down the divine presence,⁶² a rather structured mystical technique which is reminiscent of the less structured Hasidic mystical paths.⁶³

⁵⁹ Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 13–54; idem, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 103–169.

⁶⁰ See *In the Praise of the Baal Shem Tov, [Shivbei ha-Besht]* tr. & edited by Dan Ben-Amos & Jerome R. Mintz, (Schocken Books, New York, 1984), p. 27. See also *ibidem*, pp. 12, 17, 30, 34, 43, 45, 107, 136, 154.

⁶¹ See also in Ms. Sassoon 919, p. 215. See above note 55.

⁶² See also other expressions of causing the descent of a divine power in contexts that describe mythical paths in R. Yitzhaq of Acre's *'Otzar Hayyim*, Ms. Moscow-Guensburg 775, fol. 2a where the phrase *ha-ruhaniyyut ha-'Elohi* is mentioned.

⁶³ Compare the different view of Rahel Elijor, "Lurianic Kabbalah, Shabbateanism and Hasidism: Historical Sequence, Spiritual Affinity, and Differences of Identity," in eds. R. Elijor, J. Dan, *Rivkah Schatz-Uffenheimer Memorial Volume*, (Jerusalem, 1996), vol. I pp. 379–398, especially p. 391 (Hebrew), who claims that the concept of causing the presence of the deity in one's limbs is a concept invented by Hasidic masters. In general, here assumption in this article that the mystical path in Hasidism, which includes several stages one of them being *bitbodedut*, is new with the Hasidic masters is correct only if someone ignores both the rather articulated mystical techniques in both ecstatic Kabbalah and the Safedian one. See Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 59–65.

Let me introduce now a Renaissancian description of the practice of solitude, which differs, from many points of view, from that of ecstatic Kabbalah. R. Yohanan Alemanno, a companion of Pico della Mirandola, writes as follows:

At most times of the day which are the times of solitude, in the morning and in the evening, he should sit in the garden⁶⁴ which delights the soul, which [soul] feels through the five senses that there exists a beauty of variety of sights – the flowers, roses, and the sight of the fruit – and a beauty of the variety of sounds – various songs with which the birds, while nesting, make pleasant melodies ... in this manner his sensitive soul will not be sad at the beginning of solitude.⁶⁵

Here, unlike in R. Yitzhaq of Acre, the solitude does not include the element of suffering but, on the contrary, it is the joy that allows a smooth separation of the higher soul from the lower one. Now it is the garden, as it was the case of the Therapeutai in Philo's description adduced above, rather than the closed room that is the arena of the isolation. However, this text is an exceptional one.

Let me return to the reverberation of the place of seclusion or solitude as a closet. R. Elijah de Vidas, an influential Kabbalistic author flowering in the second half of the 16th century Safed, described a little chamber for seclusion:

In the case of the prophet Elisha we found the preparation of the sanctity of place as done by the Shunamite woman, as it is written⁶⁶ 'Behold now, I perceive that this is an holy man of God, which passeth by us continually. Let us make a little chamber, I pray thee, on the wall; and let us set for him there a bed, and a table, and a stool and a candlestick.' Behold that because of his sanctity there was a need for the preparation of the place, namely the little chamber, which is a place that is somehow separated from men, and the necessary preparations of the nature [sic] in use to men namely a bed and a table, a stool [and] a candlestick, which is a moderate seclusion, as it has been written by the author of *Hovot ha-Levavot*⁶⁷ concerning the three categories of recluses; 'those who isolate themselves in their house is the second category which is closer to the way of the Torah.' See there are two aspects of the sanctity of the place, and if it is possible to have them merged, like the *hitbodedut* of man in his place of study or in the synagogue, it is even better, because he will certainly gain extra holiness in his soul.⁶⁸

The Safedian master relies heavily, explicitly and repeatedly on R. Bahya ibn Paquda's *Hovot ha-Levavot*. Nevertheless, I am unable to pinpoint in this book a reference, even an implied one, to the biblical story of Elisha as a recluse. However, this topic occurred, as seen above, in R. Yitzhaq of Acre's passage quoted

⁶⁴ See above, the quote from Philo where the Therapeutes' practice has been described.

⁶⁵ *Sefer Hei ha-'Olamim*, Ms. Mantua, Biblioteca comunale, ebr. 21, fol. 56a.

⁶⁶ II Kings 4:9–10.

⁶⁷ IX:3; pp. 530–531.

⁶⁸ *Sefer Reshit Hokhmah*, the Gate of Holiness, ch. 6, ed. H. Y. Walman, (Jerusalem, 1980), vol. II p. 90. 'Gaining holiness in his soul' may reflect the drawing of the divine presence upon the mystic, as found in R. Yitzhaq of Acre, in some texts of Moshe Corovero's, and perhaps already in Al-Ghazali's passage.

above. Provided the fact that R. Elijah de Vidas was well acquainted with the views of R. Yitzhaq of Acre, as several quotes from his writings occur in *Sefer Reshit Hokhmah*, several of them dealing with the different meanings of *hitbodedut* I suggest to see also in the case of the last passage the impact of the ecstatic Kabbalist.⁶⁹ Immediately after the above passage R. Elijah compares the place of *hitbodedut* to the High Priest in the Temple,⁷⁰ a topic that has already been dealt with above. In the 17th century, one of the most famous figures who practiced a certain type of solitude was R. Sabbatai Tzevi, the Messiah of Ismir who, in his youth retreated in caves and later on in a separate room in his house.⁷¹

In a book composed in the Besht's generation, and known by him, *Siddur ha-'Ari* according to the edition of R. Sabbatai of Rashkov, there is a list of recommendations for a life of righteousness that include, inter alia, the following passage:

The root of all the good virtues is to acquire *hitbodedut*, because it is impossible to be united with God for someone who desires the company of men. And the separation that is pertinent to the masters of the Torah consists in having, all the time, a separate room where no [other] man will enter and he should sanctify that room so that it will acquire the very sanctity of the place of study⁷² if he cannot study in the synagogue^{73,74}

I see this recommendation as deeply influenced by R. Elijah de Vidas' text, especially because of the common mentioning of the *Beit Midrash* and *Beit Kneset*. Thus, in a later Lurianic text and in an early stages of Hasidism we find the continuation of a practice that had a certain history in the ecstatic and Safedian Kabbalah. This is one of the many example, which demonstrate the impact of ecstatic Kabbalah on the Hasidic mystical techniques via writings stemming from Cordovero's school. It may well be that the seclusion of R. Elijah, known as the Gaon of Vilnius, should be understood against the background of the last passage. It should be mentioned that the fact that the two main religious founding figures of the 18th century Jewish spirituality shared the ideal of corporeal solitude demonstrates that they inherited a practice accepted in much earlier circles, and indeed the historical evidence related Sabbatai Tzevi should be seen as dealing with realia and not idealia.

⁶⁹ See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 115–118, 131–132; Fenton, "La 'Hitbodedut'," pp. 145–146.

⁷⁰ *Reshit Hokhmah*, ibidem, p. 91.

⁷¹ See Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi, The Mystical Messiah*, tr. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1975), pp. 113–114, 185 and note 215.

⁷² *qedushat byhm"d*, the last word being an acronym for *Beit ha-Midrash*.

⁷³ See above the quote in the name of R. Dov Baer of Medzirez.

⁷⁴ *Siddur R. Shabbatai of Rashkov*, (Lemberg, 1788), fol. 121b. This prayerbook was known in the Besht's circle. See, e.g. Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, p. 237; Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism, A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1996), p. 262 note 91.

However, it seems that the Besht's practice of seclusion in mountains was not adopted by his disciples who preferred to seclude themselves in their houses, though even the exaggeration of such a practice encountered criticism as we learn from the no other than the grandson of the Besht, R. Barukh of Mezhibush. He is reported to have said that

Every man has the vocation of making perfect something in this world. The world has need of every single human being. But there are those who always sit in their room behind closed doors and study, and never leave the house to talk with others. For this they are called wicked. If they talked to others, they would bring to perfection something they were destined to make perfect. That is what the words mean: 'Be not be wicked by facing yourself alone.'⁷⁵ Since you face yourself only, and do not go among people, do not become wicked through solitude.⁷⁶

I wonder if we may indeed detect here a critique of the grandfather's practice early in his spiritual career, though this passage indubitably represents a reaction toward the emphasis on the importance of seclusion, apparently as practice of the great opponent of Hasidism, whose figure seems to fit the above description. Especially interesting is the resort to the strong term 'wicked' which may betray a reaction to the fierce opposition of the famous recluse from Vilnius to Hasidism.

5. On Solitude in Philosophy

As mentioned above, the concept of solitude in Jewish mystical writings owes much to a book which was indeed influenced by Sufism, though it commonly conceived of as part of Jewish philosophy: ibn Paquda's *Sefer Hovot ha-Levavot*. It seems, however, that in matters of spirit, distinctions based upon formal criteria, like literary genres are sometimes as helpful as they are confusing. In fact, a great interest in the practice of solitude is found also in the philosophical spirituality and it is quite easy to collect a considerable amount of philosophical discussions on this topic. This is true in Greek and Arabic philosophy, as well as the Jewish one. Let me adduce only one example for the attribution of the solitude as a way of life in philosophical texts.

Two forms of solitude, the corporeal and the spiritual one, are mentioned by the Muslim philosopher Averroes (1126–1198) in connection with Socrates' understanding of God:

⁷⁵ 'Avot, 2:13.

⁷⁶ Adduced by Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim, Early Masters*, (Schocken Books, New York, 1964), pp. 89–90. I could not find the Hebrew source used by Buber. I wonder if the second sentence is found, in this precise formulation, in a Hebrew source, though I do not doubt the authenticity of the part dealing with solitude.

And he who among them belong to the unique individuals, like Socrates, who chose isolation and separation from other people and retreat into their souls always, until those of great heart believed that through this dedication and forced contemplation of the above-mentioned forms, one shall arrive at the first form that can be apprehended.⁷⁷

It is possible to proceed from the intelligibles, or the forms, to the apprehension of God Himself, by means of solitude and mental concentration. Is the attribution of the practice of solitude to Socrates connected with the fact that he was the one to quote Diomita's famous comment about the ascent from the corporeal to the spiritual forms in Plato's dialogue? Thus we may assume that Jewish authors, philosophers and Kabbalists had access also to types of discussions which, different as they are from the Sufi ones, are nevertheless sources which should be taken in consideration for a better understanding of some practices known among Kabbalists. One of them, the Safedian Kabbalists' attaining a certain type of solitude when roaming on the fields around their town, is related, as I shall attempt to demonstrate elsewhere in detail, to the vision of the Peripatetic philosophers as walking in order to reach a certain form of solitude.⁷⁸ Moreover, as we had seen above⁷⁹ the vision of the Temple as the place of seclusion, as well as for mental concentration, is shared by many philosophical treatises and Kabbalistic ones. Thus, the concepts related to *hitbodedut*, are shared by the various speculative and spiritual literatures in Judaism from the 12th century to modern Hasidism. Indeed, the more individualistic orientation represented by *hitbodedut* emerges in the new genres of literature emerging in the Middle Ages as the result of a greater interaction between some segments of Jewish elites and ways of life and thought toward which rabbinic Judaism was resistant earlier.

6. Solitude and Astrology

However, the Sufic and philosophical material was not the only source that have contributed to the infiltration of a positive conception of isolation in Jewish literature. Another domain of learning that was influential was the astrological understanding of the distribution of the human qualities according to the planets. Though there is no direct relationship between the practice of isolation and mysticism in this type of literature, it nevertheless contributed to the adoption of the concept of isolation later on in Jewish circles, including in Kabbalah. A major role in this process played R. Abraham ibn Ezra, a famous 12th century

⁷⁷ From the Commentary of R. Joseph Ben Shem Tov to Averroes' *Iggeret ha-Devequt* (*Epistula de Conjunctione*), Ms. Berlin 216 (Or. Qu. 681), p. 325.

⁷⁸ On this practice see Sack, *The Kabbalah of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero*, pp. 217–219, 265–266.

⁷⁹ See note 16 above.

astronomer, biblical exegete and poet, who was deeply influenced by the medieval astrology. An important evidence as to the close relationship between the practice of solitude and the Jews is found in the Middle Ages already in his writings; in his *Commentary on Psalms* 101:2 he wrote:

'when shall you can to me' [means] the same as 'and 'Elohim came to Bala'am'⁸⁰ namely the divine spirit dwells upon him in his house, when he isolated himself from men and their laws and struggle ... and whatever interpretation [of the verse] will be correct it will deal with the time of his seclusion⁸¹ and his separation⁸². And see the meaning of 'And I shall walk'⁸³ [means] a common practice as in 'and Enoch walked'⁸⁴.

This passage is especially important as it points manifestly to an affinity between the practice of seclusion and revelation; the dwelling of the divine spirit is attained by this separation which is described as the evasion from the ordinary way of life. *Hitbodedut* functions here as part of a sequel of acts that culminates in the experience of *devequt*. Therefore, the practice of solitude is conceived as leading not only to supernatural knowledge, as it was the case of Bala'am, but also ensuring a much more mystical experience. However, beyond this technical approach, in some astrological works we find a nexus between those persons born under the aegis of Saturn and the propensity toward seclusion as part of the Saturnine character. Dealing with the major characteristics of Saturn and the entities and spiritual faculties upon which it presides, ibn Ezra enumerates, regarding the human nature:

Among the nations, the Jews are presided by Saturn, the thought and the scarcity of speech and fraud, and the isolation from men and [the power to] overcome them ... and every tree which produces the poison of death ... and the greatness of thought and the knowledge of secrets and the worship of God ... hemiplegia and leprosy ... and the day of Sabbath.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Numbers 22:9. On Bala'am and hitbodedut see also Klein-Braslavy, "Prophecy, Clairvoyance," pp. 40–41, 49–50.

⁸¹ *hitbodeduto*. I would like to indicate that here it is not the place to discuss in extenso the different meanings of this term in ibn Ezra. See, for the time being, Idel, "Hitbodedut as Concentration in Jewish Philosophy," pp. 41–44.

⁸² *hibbadelo*.

⁸³ Pslam 116:9.

⁸⁴ Genesis 5:24.

⁸⁵ *Reshit Hokhmah*, ch. 4. I combined the version found in a passage of this book as explicitly quoted in R. Joseph Bonfil, *Tzafnat Pa'aneah*, ed. David Herzog, (Cracow, 1912), I, p. 49 with the common edition of the book. See also ibidem, p. 270. The common version of this passage, edited and translated by Raphael Levi and Francisco Cantera, *The Beginning of Wisdom, An Astrological Treatise by Abraham ibn Ezra*, (Paris, 1939), pp. XLII–XLIV. For a modern French translation see in Abraham ibn Ezra, *Le Livre des fondements astrologiques*, (Bibliotheca hermetica, Retz, Paris, 1977), pp. 140–143. More on this passage see Ron Barkai, *Science, Magic and Mythology in the Middle Ages*, (The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, Jerusalem, 1987), p. 30 and note 84. (Hebrew); Idel, "Hitbodedut as Concentration in Jewish Philosophy," pp. 41–42.

Hitbodedut is a standard characteristic of Saturn also elsewhere in this author's view.⁸⁶ According to ibn Ezra, the conception of Saturn's presiding over the Jews and their nature includes therefore an inclination to seclusion, as it does include the contemplative and ruling powers. What is important in this passage is the assumption that Jews are inclined to states of solitude not as part of their spiritual efforts done by their initiative but as an in built part of their constitution. However, the inclination to isolation and seclusion is connected to other spiritual qualities, and it is not to be conceived of as a religious achievement, as it is the case in the former quotation; there it precedes the dwelling of the divine spirit, here it is part of a list which includes several spiritual qualities. Even more explicit is the astrological background of the relationship between the hitbodedut and religious perfection in the commentary on Exodus 6:3, where ibn Ezra avers that he discloses a secret:

God created three worlds ... and the mundane world receives power from the intermediary world,⁸⁷ each individual in accordance to the supernal constellation⁸⁸. And because the intellectual soul is more exalted than the intermediary world, if she will be wise and will know the deeds of God, those done without any intermediary and those done by the means of an intermediary, and [if] she will leave the desires of the world, and [if] she will isolate herself in order to cleave to the Exalted God. And if there is the constellation of the stars during pregnancy a bad time destined to come in a certain day, God which is cleaving to him will change the course of the causes in order save him from evil ... and this is the secret of the entire Torah ... this is why Moses was able to change the course of the mundane world and perform miracles and wonders.⁸⁹

Hitbodedut, meaning both corporeal and mental activities, described elsewhere in ibn Ezra as related to Saturn, functions here as part of a sequel of acts that culminates in the experience of *devequt*. Therefore, the practice of the seclusion is conceived as leading not only to supernatural knowledge, but also ensuring a much more mystical experience, which at its turn helps avoiding a bad experience, and even to perform miracles.⁹⁰ Thus the process of isolation and cleaving to a supreme spiritual being enable someone to circumvent the evil inscribed in the ordinary course of nature as dictated by astrological constellations.

⁸⁶ See ibn Ezra's *Sefer ha-Te'amim*, ed. Yehudah L. Fleisher, (Mossad ha-Rav Kook, Jerusalem, 1951), p. 62.

⁸⁷ Namely the celestial world, constituted by planets and stars.

⁸⁸ *ha-Ma'arakhab ha-'Elyonah*.

⁸⁹ ed. A. Weiser, vol. II p. 47.

⁹⁰ On this issue and its medieval reverberations see Aviezer Ravitzky, "The Anthropological Theory of Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. I. Twersky, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1984), vol. II, pp. 238–239, 250; Howard Kreisel, "Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. LXXV (1984), pp. 119–121; Gitit Holzman, *The Theory of the Intellect and Soul in the Thought of Rabbi Moshe Narboni*, (Ph. D. Thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1997), pp. 293–299 (Hebrew).

Needless to say that this vision of solitude as part of someone's being constellated by Saturn become much more influential during the Renaissance period.⁹¹

7. Conclusions

The ascent of the ideal of solitude in Jewish texts, mainly in high medieval treatises composed in the Near East and in Western Europe, should be related to two different developments: one is the emergence of a greater importance of the concept of the individual, while the second, totally independent, the impact of the Muslim practices of *khalwa*. Though the first explanation, concerning Kabbalists in the West, may explain how some Jewish mystics become more open to concepts and practices that were more relevant for the individual, it cannot explain their emergence, which is to be explained by resorting to the influence of earlier, Muslim sources.

The occurrences of the ideal of solitude in the above texts, which constitute a small percentage of the extant salient material, may nevertheless be understood better against the background of the existence of imitable human examples of practices in the environments of the Jewish mystics. Philo was probably influenced by the Therapeutai. R. Bahya ibn Paquda, R. Yitzhaq of Acre, R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon, R. Elijah de Vidas, and R. Hayyim Vital lived in places where Muslim mystics were active, and we know even about the cooperation between Muslims and Jews in some cases. In Christian Spain however, the greater impact is definitely that of the astrological and philosophical texts. In any case, those forms of non-Jewish literatures, whose influence on medieval Jewish texts is undeniable, represent modes of more universalistic and, at the same time also individualistic approaches, disjunctive in their nature, which are different from the more particularistic and corporate assumptions of the biblical-rabbinic thought, conjunctive in essence. It would suffice to watch a modern synagogue or a *Yeshivah*, where the loud performance during prayer and as part of the halakhic arguments are so dominant, in order to understand that meditations based on recollection in solitude did not become major forms of religious activity. A spirituality based on the importance of the utterance in ritual, whether in liturgy or the study of the Torah, will opt for the greater im-

⁹¹ See Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, *Saturne et Melancholie*, tr. L. Evrard, [Gallimard, Paris, 1989], pp. 389–432; Daniel P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic, From Ficino to Campanella*, (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, London, 1975), pp. 45–50; Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn*, (The Norton Library, New York, 1969), p. 74; Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, (Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1979), pp. 271–272.

portance of the sonority which embraces a community rather than the individual's reveries for long periods in a state of solitude.⁹²

Last but not least: I propose to see in the above discussion not only a way to follow the entrance of a concept dealing with the mystical path, but a blueprint for other components of the mystical paths in Jewish mysticism. According to such an approach, the ecstatic Kabbalah, different forms of Jewish philosophy and astrology, and their sources in their environments, will serve as important sources for the developments in Jewish mysticism, including Hasidism. Too easy has the history of Jewish mysticism based on the assumption that main inventions took place without a prior inspection of the relevant material, which was part of bodies of knowledge that remained outside the scope of most of the modern study of Jewish mysticism.⁹³

⁹² See M. Idel, "On Talismanic Language in Jewish Mysticism," *Diogenes*, 170 vol. 43\2 (1995), pp. 23–41, idem, *Hasidism*, pp. 145–188.

⁹³ See idem, "Saturn and Sabbatai Tzevi: A New Approach to Sabbateanism," *Jewish Studies*, vol. 37 (1997), pp. 161–184 (Hebrew), idem, "The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's kabbalah to the Understanding of Jewish Mysticism," in eds. P. Schäfer, J. Dan, *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, 50th Years After*, (J. C. B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1993), pp. 117–144 and see also above, note 63.